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ABSTRACT

The true story of Oscar, an Arctic husky who had been a sledge dog in Antarctica, is told for readers aged 10 to 12 years. The author, Oscar's long-time master, visits Oscar at the Melbourne zoo as the story begins. He recounts some of his memories of Oscar, including a number of expeditions, and Oscar's fight to remain "king dog" of the sledge team. Oscar leaves the zoo and returns to Antarctica where he sires pups and helps to train the sledge teams. Throughout Oscar's story, the history of the role that dogs have played in the exploration of Antarctica is told. Although dog teams are no longer relied upon for transportation, the courage and skill of dogs is bound tightly in the story of Antarctica. Numerous photographs and illustrations appear throughout the story. A glossary is included, as is a list of other materials on Antarctica for younger readers. (DB)

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OSCAR

Nils Lied

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OSCAR

Nils Lied

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The Author

Nils Lied was born and educated in Norway. After taking courses in radio and navigation in Oslo he went to sea at eighteen years of age. He served in the Merchant Navy and in the Royal Norwegian Navy.

The first serious test of his skill as a navigator came during the Second World War when he was serving on a tanker which was torpedoed in the North Atlantic. He sailed a lifeboat 380 nautical miles to Reykjavik (Iceland), making a perfect landfall. This was all the more creditable because he had a wrist-watch for a chronometer, half a pencil and a roll of paper that was never intended for navigation calculations. Later, he was given command of a corvette.

Nils came to Australia in 1948 and served in the Antarctic Division of the Department of Science on four wintering expeditions – Heard Island in 1951, Mawson 1956, Davis 1957 and 1961. He also participated in summer expeditions to Macquarie Island in 1955, Heard Island in 1963 and Enderby Land in 1964-65. He was always in charge of dog teams and has sledged 8500 kilometres – give or take a metre or two! He was a member of the party of three which was the first to circumnavigate Heard Island on foot. His name appears on a number of geographic features of the map of Antarctica – Mt Lied, Lied Bluff, Lied Glacier, Lied Island, Lied Lake and Mt Nils. He now lives at Adventure Bay, Bruny Island, Tasmania.

Nils has received both Norwegian and British decorations. He holds the Polar Medal and Bar.

Introduction

Oscar was a real dog and the events that are described in this story all took place.

Dogs have played an important part in the exploration of Antarctica. Roald Amundsen reached the South Pole with the help of a dog team. Most of the early expeditions used dogs to sledge across the ice and some explorers owed their lives to the courage and skill of the huskies.

Modern transport has taken over the role that dogs used to play. These days motorised toboggans, ski-doos and aircraft have taken the place of the dog teams. At Mawson, Davis and Scott Base, however, there are still dog teams and dog handlers. People at these bases enjoy the company of the dogs and the occasional sledge trip with dog teams serves as a reminder of the days when the huskies were the main form of transport in Antarctica.

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Melbourne was in the middle of a heat-wave. The air was still and there were few people moving about the great city. At the Zoo, there were not many people around. I made my way down the paths until I arrived at a large shaded pen. It had a wading pool and a roof for shelter. In the shadows, the big dog lay in the heat, sleeping with his legs stretched out.

With the key the keeper had given me, I unlocked the door and let myself into the pen.

"Oscar," I called.

His head lifted, cocked to one side and his ears pricked up. I squatted in front of him. With his tail wagging slowly, he came over to me and put his big head under my arm. I buried my fingers in his thick coat and I could feel the sweat under the woolly hair.

"You are hot, laddie," I said, "but you'll moult soon and then you'll feel better. It's the same for us all. We have to adjust to the heat every time we come home. It's harder for you because Melbourne is not your home."

I led the old warrior into the shade and sat down alongside him.

"Yes," I told him, "you're getting old. In man-years, you'd be close to sixty and if you could get false teeth for dogs, you'd need a set. You lost some teeth in battle but most of them are just worn down from chewing seal meat. Your old muscles are stiff from running 8000 kilometres in front of a sledge. Laddie, that's a lot of kilometres and a lot of running, and most of it we have done

together. That's why I didn't want you to end up the way most huskies do - with a bullet in your old age or by losing your last battle. As a friend, you've asked for little and put up with much."

"Sometimes you have made me hopping mad. Sometimes you have amazed me with your strength and intelligence. But I think we always understood each other. They say a successful driver can understand the personality of each of his dogs and knows them in all their moods. Perhaps that's why we got on so well together and why you never really got the upper hand, although I know that you tried."

Oscar relaxed. With a happy sigh, he flopped down by my feet, his big muzzle resting against my right shoe. To his mind, all was well with the world. No sledge to pull, plenty to eat and drink, and his boss sitting down without a harness in his hand - just talking.

I wondered if he missed the ice of Antarctica and if he was upset by his new home. Perhaps he was dreaming of the many times we had raced across the snow with our breath freezing like a mask over fur and clothing. He might even dream of those long-ago, exciting days on Heard Island when he was one of dozens of young pups roaming about the camp, fighting and chasing birds along the beach. Perhaps he remembered that trip we did at Mawson when he led his team for the very last time across the slippery blue ice to the southern end of Mt Henderson. We went there to show the new Mawson men how to manage a dog team.

Shakespeare, leader of Frank Hurley's dog team, (Shackleton Expedition, 1914-15).

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The dog-lines

There is still a place for dog teams and their handlers in Antarctica.

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"Remember, Oscar," I went on "we beat the tractor train easily. They managed to go eight kilometres from Mawson but we went to Mt Henderson and back in the same time, covering thirty-five kilometres. Now your sons are carrying on after you. Phil and Nils have both become leaders and other young dogs are growing up to replace you old ones. You and Streaky and Horace are the last of the old guard and now even your old mate Horace has died. From heart failure, of all things."

Looking down at Oscar, I saw that he was a true Arctic husky. The husky is a mongrel which, over years of breeding and training, has turned into the perfect means of transport in the Arctic and Antarctic.

The big dog looked like a wolf. His eyes were slanted and the hackles along his back ended in a long, bushy tail. He had huge pads with strong nails - so strong that they scratched footholds in the hard, blue ice. His coat was heavy with two layers to keep out the bitter cold. A husky never barks, but howls with nose lifted to the sky. Sometimes on moonlit nights, one dog would suddenly let out a long howl and then the whole team would join in the concert. The howling of the dogs is a sad, lonely sound in the icy desert of Antarctica.

Then I remembered the time when Oscar had to defend his position as leader. I had been flying over Long Fjord. When I returned, I was met by Bill, one of my workmates.

"Oscar and Horace have had a fight," he said. "Horace got loose and attacked Oscar. They fought like crazy before we could separate them. Looks like Horace wants to be leader."

"Any damage?" I asked.

"Horace's head is covered in blood, but I think it's Oscar's. He nearly ripped off Oscar's ear," Bill replied.

"Well," I said, "this means trouble on the trip. They'd better sort it out before we leave. If they fight again, let them finish it."

The other dogs were restless and jumped about on their chains. They sensed that a fight was on the way. Oscar kept shaking his head, glaring at Horace, who stood on his hind legs and howled at the old dog.

"I'll have a bet on Horace," said Morris. "He looks a stronger fighter than Oscar."

"Never," I replied. "Oscar will belt the hide off him. It's a pity Horace is dumb enough to try. You wait and see. Anyway, it's a good thing to settle the leadership once and for all."

We picked up our gear and went up to the hut for dinner.

While we were washing up after dinner, we heard a terrible din from the dog-lines. Alan took a quick look through the window.

"It's on," he shouted and we all rushed out, leaving the dishes in the sink.

Both Oscar and Horace had managed to get off their chains at the same time. They were fighting on the long, smooth snow drift below the dog-lines.

"Let them fight," I yelled as some of the men rushed in to separate them. I had the dog whip in my hand, ready to stop the winner before he killed the loser.

"Now, just watch the work of an expert," I said, pointing at Oscar.

The dog fight started in the usual way. They strutted around on stiff legs, growling with their teeth bared and their hackles raised. Both dogs knew how to fight. They each weighed about fifty kilograms. Oscar was bigger, but Horace was a powerful dog. He had a shorter muzzle, almost like a bear, and the thick hair round his neck made him look like a lion. Every muscle in Oscar's body was tense, the hackles on his back were bristling, his wounded ear lay against his head and his slanting eyes were bloodshot with rage.

The two dogs made several false rushes at each other, like boxers. Then Horace tried to tear Oscar's ear. Oscar leapt away, turned in mid-air, then tore open Horace's shoulder. Roaring with rage, Horace charged, but Oscar was ready for him.

"This is it," I thought.

Oscar's fangs sank into Horace's chest and both dogs rose in the air as Oscar tried to throw Horace back. This would have ended most fights, but Horace was tough. He let himself fall, but rolled backwards. Oscar lost his grip, leaving a bloody gash in the other dog's chest. Growling and panting, the two huskies circled again.

"Second round," said Morris.

"I wish you'd stop them, Nils," said Bill. "They'll kill each other."

"No, Bill," I replied. "I don't like this any more than you do, but unless they settle who's going to be king, we'll never have any peace in the team. Don't worry. I won't let it go too far."

Again and again, Horace charged and each time Oscar fought back, but he was saving his strength for the final round. Oscar too had been bitten. Both dogs had long gashes along the shoulders, legs and head. The other dogs were all wild with excitement.

At last Horace seemed tired. He didn't charge as often as before. Both dogs met in a head-on charge and they fought on their hind legs like bears, each with a hold on the other's ear. All around, the snow was splattered with blood. Then, the dogs let go and circled.

"Round three coming up," said Alan.

Again, the false rushes, then Oscar met Horace's charge. With a roar, he sank his fangs into Horace's throat, rose on his hind legs and, with a vicious twist, threw the other dog on his back. It was the end of the battle. Oscar bit Horace's throat again and, now the complete master, raked his soft belly.

Horace struggled weakly and his growls turned into howls and whimpers. He was thoroughly beaten. Oscar let him get up, then attacked him one more time, throwing him to the ground.

A pair of "Greenland dogs", huskies who saw service with the Australasian Antarctic Expedition 1911-14.

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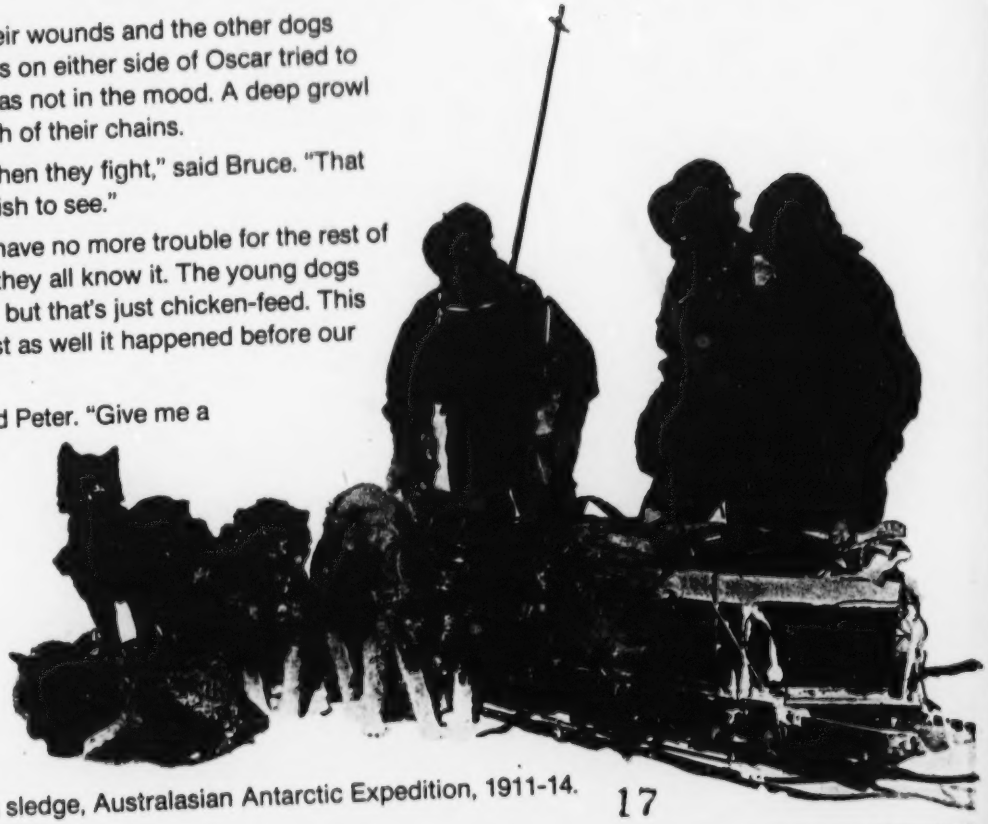
Before he could break Horace's spirit, making him useless as a sledge dog, I let the long whip whistle over Oscar. Then each dog was grabbed by the men and put back in his place along the chain.

Winner and loser licked their wounds and the other dogs soon quietened down. The dogs on either side of Oscar tried to reach him, but the old leader was not in the mood. A deep growl sent them back to the full length of their chains.

"They are just pure wolf when they fight," said Bruce. "That was the cruellest sight I ever wish to see."

"Yes," I agreed, "but we'll have no more trouble for the rest of the season. Oscar is king and they all know it. The young dogs will have the occasional scrap, but that's just chicken-feed. This one we had to have and it's just as well it happened before our trip."

"Charming little pets," said Peter. "Give me a friendly old gorilla any time."



Adjusting a sledge, Australasian Antarctic Expedition, 1911-14.

Huskies at the Pole,
Amundsen Expedition, 1911

Sledge dogs made it possible to reach the Poles and they have taken part in every other major polar exploration. In the last important journey across the continent from the Weddell sea, via the South Pole, to McMurdo Sound in the Ross Sea area, two dog teams led the way for the motor transport.

When he got to the Pole and met Sir Edmund Hillary, Sir Vivian Fuchs thought enough of his dogs to have them flown out to Scott Base at McMurdo Sound. From the Pole onwards, he no longer needed them as the route had been marked out by Sir Edmund's party.

Roald Amundsen's journey to the South Pole with five men and four dog teams is well known. If Scott had used dogs to haul the load instead of men, he probably would have succeeded.

Lately, our own expeditions have found a way of surveying new areas by flying men and dog teams to a known point and supplying them with air drops, while the dogs go to places that vehicles can't reach.

I touched Oscar with my foot. "Your children will probably be with us for a long time yet, old boy, and your strength and spirit runs in their blood too. Tractors and aircraft are good, but we still need dogs like you."

Camp in Antarctica: dog-lines, sledges and tent.

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I thought of the satisfaction I had got from helping to explore Davis. I enjoyed working with the four men, who are still my friends in spite of a year living so close together, but the greatest pleasure for me came from handling our four-footed friends, the huskies. Without them, our work would have been ten times harder.

It is difficult to say what Antarctica means to each of us. Some go for adventure but don't often find it. Others go to escape from a dull life, a few go for the money and many want to do scientific research.

In science, Antarctica presents many problems, but we are learning more and more about it. During the International Geophysical Year, many of the old puzzles were solved.

Antarctica is one place where nations work and live together. It doesn't matter who you are, where you are from or what you think. What counts is how well you work.

Antarctica seems to bring out the best in those who work there. The people who have worked there usually come back for more. Nearly all the men I've met in Antarctica have turned up again, sooner or later.

We didn't know it then, but Oscar too had another job to do in Antarctica. He was well fed and well looked after in the Melbourne Zoo. The children and the keepers loved him. Many Antarctic explorers came to visit him and they were happy that he did not finish up dropping in the traces or with a bullet in his head. No one had the heart to destroy Oscar, a polar legend. No one wanted this magnificent "king dog" to die.

Oscar stayed at the Zoo for two years. Then came a message from the Australian base at Wilkes (now Casey) asking for new blood for their team of huskies. No pups had been born for at least two years. So Oscar went home to the ice and snow, to the howling blizzards, to the cold and to the endless summer sunlight.

His task was to sire new pups, and to help train the teams, including the ones with his pups. He did all this with great skill. The men at Wilkes grew very fond of him and he taught them, as well as the dogs, much about sledging. He knew how to cross the sea ice where it was thin and how to pass the dangerous crevasses. He could find his way back when the driver was lost.

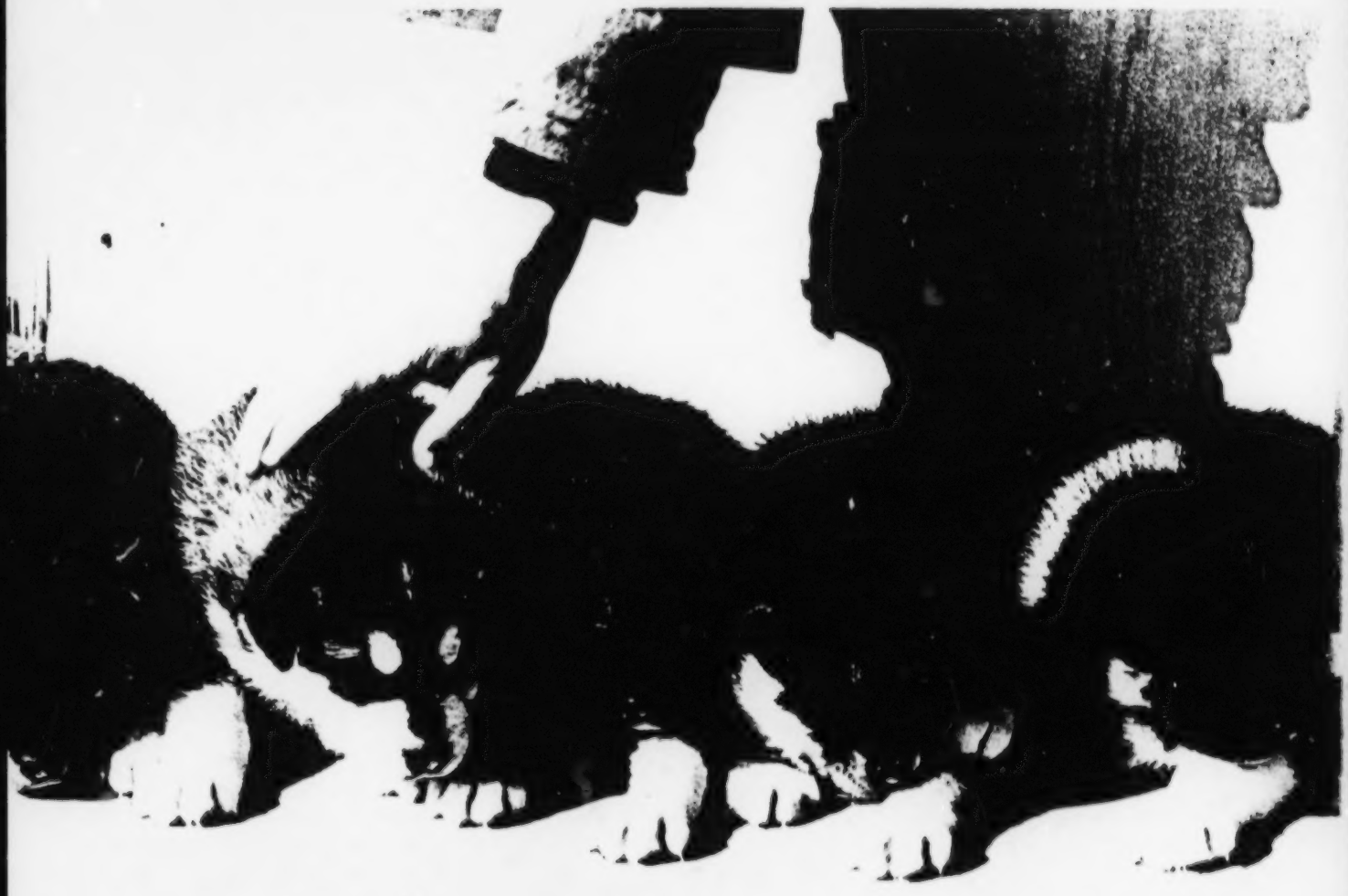
As his own offspring grew into sledge dogs, he trained them and, when they were young dogs of six to eight months, Oscar could relax. He lived the life of a retired gentleman.

He dozed in the sun that warmed the rocks at the dog-lines and at night, he slept in one of the huts. He was fed like a king and was allowed to wander about the camp, visiting his friends and moving about as he pleased.

During his two years at Wilkes, Oscar sired fifty pups and built up new teams. He would still take the lead as I had trained him to do at Mawson and Davis. The old warrior never forgot a thing. He remembered the Eskimo commands of "illi" for turning right and "ee yuk" for left.

Husky pup

Husky pups five weeks old



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Oscar was twelve years old, nearly eighty in human terms, when the end came. During a dreadful spring blizzard, he got up stiffly and stood near the door of the hut, waiting to be let out. He disappeared into the storm.

This time, he did not come back.

The alarm was raised and the whole camp turned out to look for him. To this day, his body has never been found.

The great dog must have felt that the race was run and decided to go out into the blizzard to die like a gentleman. When they are too old to run with the pack, Arctic wolves do the same thing. This was the end chosen by Oscar, the greatest sledge dog of the Antarctic.

As I look back on the years I spent "on the ice", as we say, I realise that my seven and a half years were all spent with Oscar, a dear and trusted friend. He was a great animal, over fifty kilograms, with paws as big as my hands. When, rarely, he rose on his hind legs to lick my face, he towered over me. Some dog.

Sometimes I dig out my two Polar medals, awarded by the Queen, and I say to myself "Oscar, you old rascal, these are yours, my friend."

Lupoid, so named because (like Oscar) he looked like a wolf. He came from the Hudson Bay area of Canada (Shackleton Expedition, 1914-15).

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GLOSSARY

crevasses	Big cracks in the ice which are formed when the ice moves over uneven rocks or when floating ice spreads.
dog-lines	Fixed wires or chains which the dogs are tied to when they are not at work.
hackles	The hair on a dog's neck or back which rises when the dog is angry.
fjord	A long, narrow stretch of sea between high cliffs.
mongrel	A dog of mixed or uncertain breed.
sea ice	The sea around Antarctica is frozen and the big area of ice stretching out from the land is called sea ice.
snow drift	A bank of snow heaped by the wind.

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Oscar is one of a series of four storybooks which are part of the Pacific Circle Consortium's Antarctic Project.

Other storybooks in the series are:

Rocky the Rockhopper Penguin (8-10 years)
The tale of a brave and inquisitive rockhopper and the voyage from his Macquarie Island home across the Southern Ocean to Antarctica.

The Adventures of Salik the Husky (8-10 years)
The story of a Greenland husky pup's voyage to Antarctica and how he learns to be a sledge dog.

Castles of Ice (11-13 years)
A true story of Antarctic adventure, Castles of Ice describes a sledging trip to the Douglas Islands and the difficulties and rewards of working in Antarctica.

Learning Outcomes and Activities which can be used with these modules are included in the teachers' guide. **Teaching and Learning about Antarctica**, to be published by the Curriculum Development Centre.

Sourcebooks which can be used with the storybooks are:

Penguins (10-12 years)
Background information on Penguins and case studies of three penguins - the Adelie, the emperor and the rockhopper.

Antarctica's Secrets Revealed (10-13 years)
This is in question-and-answer format, and provides a wealth of information about the Antarctic continent.

Living and Working in Antarctica (11-14 years)
Why do people brave the ice and snow to work in the harsh Antarctic environment? Here are some of the answers.

Antarctic Discovery and Exploration (10-14 years)
A look at Antarctica from the first sightings and the expeditions of the heroic era through to present day research.

Macquarie Island (11-13 years)
This Australian sub-Antarctic island is introduced with information on its animals and plants as well as on human activities.

Campbell Island (11-13 years)
Campbell Island comes under New Zealand administration and is a meteorological base. The animals and plants are described and the effects of human interference are examined.

Plants and Animals of Antarctica (11-14 years)
A filmstrip with 72 frames and an accompanying script and audio-tape.

Oceanic Birds of Antarctica (11-14 years)
Case studies of three Antarctic birds - the south polar skua, the snow petrel and the Adelie penguin

For older readers:

The Polar Continent
Seals of the Southern Ocean
Whales of the Southern Ocean
Antarctic Foodchains
The Scientist at Work
It Happened in Antarctica
From Snow to Icebergs
Ecosystems of the Southern Ocean
International Relations in Antarctica
The Geology and Mineral Resources of Antarctica

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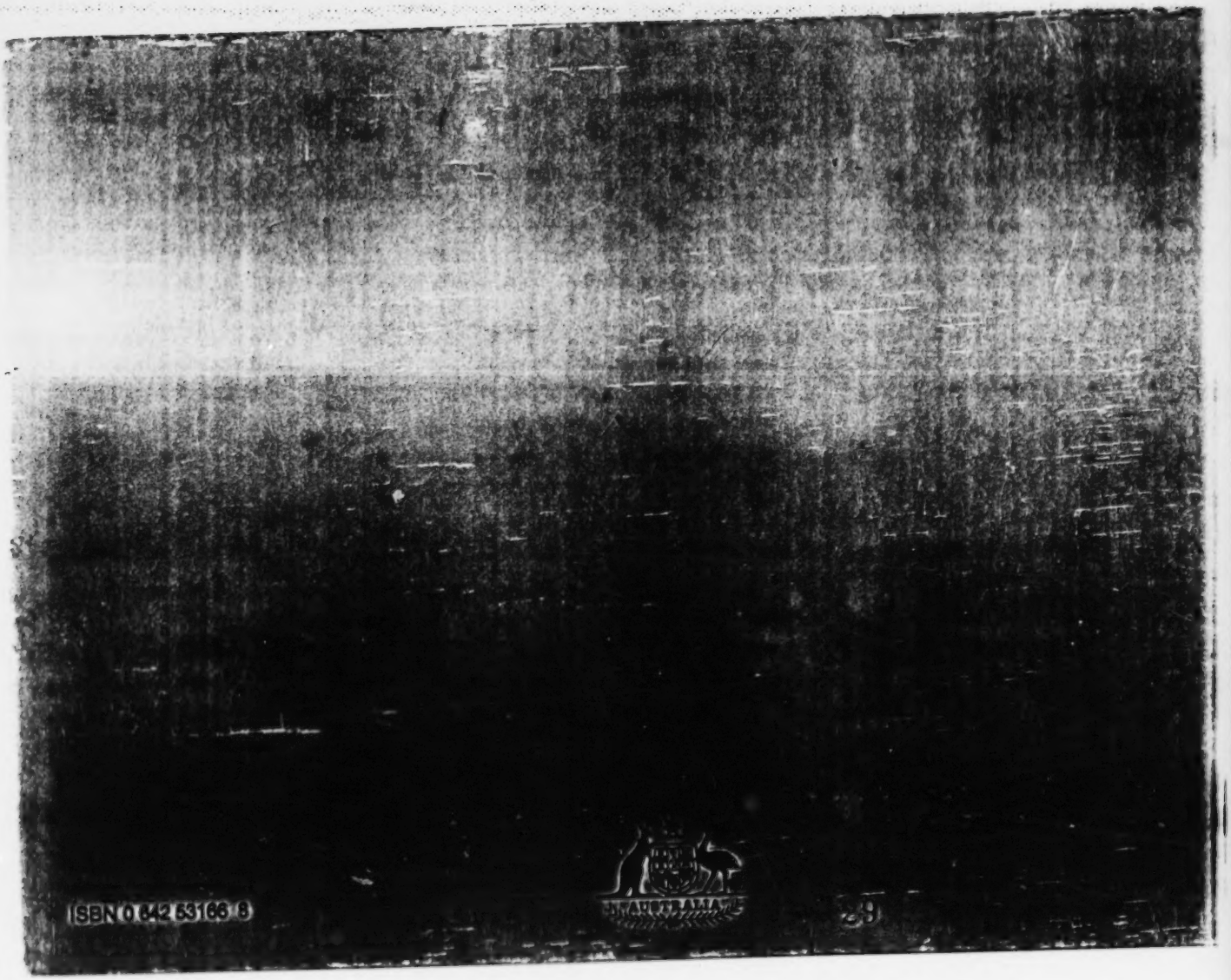
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